



Gone Away

by Akhila Pamula

The soft pitter-patter of the rain has a calming effect as I gaze out of the large windows of my new living room into the courtyard. The floor is still littered with boxes of every shape and size, the cream-colored walls naked, begging for accessories to adorn their bare faces. *I hate moving.* I scan the red-brick path, framed by perfectly trimmed bushes, water accumulating in the bowl-shaped yellow tulips that surround a white metal bench sitting at the end of the lane. A smile creeps onto my face as I flash back to my childhood backyard, the green grass tickling my feet, the voices of my parents and my brother echoing in my mind like a dream. I close my eyes and picture the white bench that still sits in the shade against the wall in the backyard. It has been every possible color—green to gray, completely bare to multicolored, all due to my brief love affair with acrylic paints. It has persevered through the unbearably hot desert summers,

the brief yet powerful rainstorms, and the shallow frost of winter. Though slightly rusty, it has always been there, my throne on lazy Sunday afternoons. As I reminisce, I realize just how long it has been since I have been back home, and the tears trickling down my cheeks mirror the raindrops rolling down the window.

I left home for college at the age of 17. While most of my friends were also moving out of the house to begin this journey, I took it to the extreme, moving over 3,000 miles away to the opposite coast. While my friends could drive home on a moment's notice, I had to commit to a six-hour plane ride; visiting home was a luxury. Yet I felt confident that I could thrive. I had always been extremely independent, balancing school with hours of extracurricular dance and orchestra rehearsals while maintaining a vibrant social life. During high school, if I was lucky, I would see my parents before heading to bed, and so I found it an exciting new challenge to move somewhere where I would be forced to become even more independent and essentially start over. Yes, I would be stripped of that security blanket of family and friends, but after all, they would all just be a quick phone call away, right?

The first few months were torture. I never realized how much I would miss my family. We lived under the same roof, and even if we didn't always get along or have conversations every day, the mere sight of them was enough to keep me grounded and happy. I no longer had that. Feelings of guilt would bubble up in my stomach, a constant ache. I knew that my family, though supportive, wasn't exactly thrilled with my decision to go so far away. My younger brother was only 13 years old and at a critical point in his life, facing the transition from being a carefree boy to a wily teenager. I felt guilty not being there to guide him through

the tangled ropes of middle school. I can still see the look of sadness in his eyes as he left on the plane back to California and realized that this dorm room was my new home, a home far away from him. And though I knew that he needed to grow up and learn to navigate without me being there to coddle him, it was hard to see him go.

My parents knew that my decision had merit: I was accepted into medical school right out of high school, a feat that would save me years of extra school and tuition. My father tried to keep me home by promising me a car, an apartment, and more freedom if I just stayed local; he did not want his daughter facing the challenges of the real world so far away. My mother was more understanding, but she was dealing with the stress of being a newly diagnosed diabetic. Her diabetes was not under control and the complications of the disease were making her life more and more uncomfortable. I used my feelings of guilt and my longing for home, though, to fuel my fire. I needed to do well and make a name for myself so I *could* come back to California, so I *could* take care of my mother, guide my brother, and be my father's little girl again.

In one of my favorite books, *The House on Mango Street*, Esperanza realizes that as much as she wants to distance herself from Mango Street, she grew up there and it will always be a part of her. She writes about her experiences in order to forge a relationship between herself and her community. While still maintaining her own voice and identity, she knows she must remember her roots.

I'm not going to lie. Like Esperanza, I do not plan on settling in my hometown when I finish medical school. Yet I will never forget how that town shaped me: the diverse groups of people I met and grew up with who helped me learn to understand and to relate to my new friends today,

and to my patients in the future. The experiences I have had made me a strong, perseverant, and independent woman. My parents live there. My roots are there. And just like Esperanza says, "I have gone away to come back. For the ones I left behind." And so I will go back and live close enough so that, on a whim, I'll be able to swing by and rest on that bench in my backyard, with my father, my mother, and my brother sitting right next to me, shaded from the familiar California sun.



Akhila graduated as an International Baccalaureate diploma recipient and went on to earn a B.S. in biology from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. Akhila is currently a student at Albany Medical College. Along with being involved with scientific research, she is deeply involved in a teaching program that focuses on at-risk children in the community. In her spare time, she enjoys exploring and eating her way along the East Coast and sleeping in.

